

VZCZCXRO4713
RR RUEHAG RUEHAST RUEHDA RUEHDBU RUEHDF RUEHFL RUEHIK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHLN RUEHLZ RUEHPOD RUEHROV RUEHSR RUEHVK RUEHYG
DE RUEHSF #1013 2321326
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 201326Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4164
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SOFIA 001013

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [BU](#)
SUBJECT: STREET BATTLE IN CAPITAL HIGHLIGHTS ROMA PLIGHT

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Riots rocked a section of Bulgaria's capital Sofia August 14-15 when some 200 armed Roma marshaled to combat a rumored imminent attack by a skinhead group. Several people were injured during two days of unrest. Both the President and Prime Minister called for a quick investigation to prevent escalation of ethnic tensions. Violence has now eased off but anger and suspicion remain pronounced in both the Roma and adjoining communities. The street battle again highlighted the acute social problems of the Roma minority and their uneasy relationship with law enforcement.
END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) With details still murky and contradictory information and rumor still flying, authorities are piecing together what transpired over two days of violent clashes between Roma and skinheads. The police are pointing at Roma as instigators (the usual practice) but the causes no doubt run much deeper. According to police and media reports, on August 14, some 200 Bulgarians of Roma origin armed with knives, axes, sticks and spades went on a rampage in the north-west Sofia district Krasna Polyana, after rumors surfaced that they were about to be attacked by a group of skinheads. Reportedly chanting "Death to the Bulgarians," Roma smashed the windows of four cars and overturned garbage cans. Several people were apparently injured, but exact numbers of the injured are not available. Police detained four Roma for acts of hooliganism. While police are still investigating, Roma witnesses claimed it was retaliation for a clash that took place the evening of August 12, when a group of young men, described by Roma witnesses as skinheads, allegedly attacked three Roma teenagers, one of whom was severely beaten. On August 19, police detained four ethnic Bulgarians, between 16 and 20 years of age, as accomplices in the beating. Police identified them as members of a teenage group with no apparent connection to the skinheads. (Note: While skinheads are known to be present in Bulgaria, their numbers are thought to be comparatively small).

13. (SBU) According to human rights activists, the latest incidents were symbolic of the plight of Bulgarian Roma, many of whom are poor, illiterate, and marginalized. Roma make up about 4.7 percent of Bulgaria's 7.8 million population, according to official statistics, though the actual figure is likely significantly higher. The Third Annual Index of Failed States recently released by the Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy magazine gave Bulgaria a low score on its ability to address the needs of the Roma population. (Bulgaria, which now chairs the Decade of Roma project, has made undistinguished progress.)

PRESIDENT, PM URGE SWIFT INVESTIGATION

14. (SBU) Commenting on the incident, which made sensational, front-page headlines in Bulgaria's main dailies, both President Georgi Parvanov and Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev called for a swift investigation in order to prevent escalation of ethnic tensions. Speaking with reporters, Stanishev said Bulgaria should be a home to all citizens "who should have equal rights and obligations." Stanishev was quoted as saying that certain political forces have been instigating ethnic hatred. Extreme nationalist party Ataka has successfully exploited previous tensions between ethnic Bulgarians and Roma. Strongly anti-United States and

anti-EU, Ataka emerged as a surprisingly potent protest force during 2005 general elections and has since continued to fan negative attitudes against the country's Roma and Turkish minorities. Following the latest incident, Ataka leader Volen Siderov again mounted his demagogic soapbox, saying the situation exposed a lack of developed statehood in Bulgaria, as illustrated by the alleged passivity of the police "while hundreds of raging Roma endangered people's lives." Another extreme nationalist group, the Bulgarian National Union, announced on August 19 that it planned to organize self-defense groups to protect the population in case of emergency situations such as ethnic clashes and natural disasters.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: This latest incident of Roma unrest is unlikely to spill over into sustained protests or ethnic violence. Nevertheless, the disturbances expose underlying ethnic tensions and highlight the acute need for consistent long-term actions on part of the Bulgarian government to integrate the country's Roma population.

KARAGIANNIS